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SUBJECT: IVOIRIAN WOMEN HELD BACK BY SOCIETY, POVERTY AND
LACK OF EDUCATION

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¶1. (U) Summary. Ivoirian jurisprudence puts women on an equal footing with men and protects their rights. However, these laws are infrequently enforced due to ignorance of the law or societal pressures. Ivoirian women from diverse sectors of society told Emboffs that Ivoirian women, especially women living in rural areas, need education and economic independence in order to become full-fledged members of society on an equal footing with men. End Summary.

Equal Before the Law

¶2. (U) A member of the Bar Association of Cote d'Ivoire told Emboff that all Ivoirian laws, including the Constitution, give men and women equal rights. Other interlocutors noted that Cote d'Ivoire has adopted most international agreements regarding equality for women and women's rights. Both Ivoirian women and men earned the right to vote in 1946 when the country was a French colony. A ministry specifically focused on women's issues was first created in 1975. Today the Ministry of Family, Women and Social Affairs has an office with responsibility for gender equality and promotion. However, the fact that this Ministry was allocated to the opposition in the transition government is an indication that it was not considered very important to the president's camp and we understand that it is one of the most under-funded ministries in the government.

¶3. (U) A Supreme Court judge told Emboff the law provides there will be no differences in salary based on gender and prohibits prospective employers from asking job applicants about their plans to form a family. According to Embassy interlocutors, the problem seems to be women's failure to exercise their rights due to a lack of awareness of their rights as well as societal pressure. One glaring exception to women's legal equality is the country's pension law, although it does not disadvantage women. While a man's pension is transferred to his widow upon his death, a widower is not entitled to his wife's pension. A law is being drafted at the Ministry of Justice to rectify this inequity.

Politics - A Man's Game

¶4. (U) Most women Emboff spoke to said they have not faced discrimination or been disadvantaged in the exercise of their profession. Approximately half of the members of the Ivoirian Bar Association are women and women are well represented in the judiciary. Women lawyers seem to practice the full gamut of the law rather than being focused solely on women and family issues. One sector where women reportedly still face challenges to advancement is politics.

¶5. (SBU) There are extremely influential women politicians in Cote d'Ivoire. Simone Gbagbo, the country's First Lady, is a founding member of the FPI political party, serves as one of

its vice presidents, and is a member of the legislature. Despite her stature, the First Lady does little to champion women's issues. In fact, some female leaders have told Embassy that Mrs. Gbagbo has studiously avoided being too closely linked to women's causes for fear of not being taken seriously as a politician. Henriette Dagri Diabate is the Secretary General of the RDR party, one of the country's three largest parties. She has been active in the party for many years and was even imprisoned in 1999 as a result of her political activities. However, women members of political parties told Emboff that in general women do not hold decision making positions in the parties. A woman who is the vice president of one of the country's smaller parties told Emboff that women party members are put to work cooking and dancing when the parties conduct mobilization campaigns. Several interlocutors noted that politics' image as a world of dirty tricks keeps women away. Unfortunately, Cote d'Ivoire's crop of leading politicians isn't doing much to change that image.

Role in Government

¶16. (SBU) There are 32 cabinet ministers; 4 are women and they head up the Ministries of the Fight Against HIV/AIDS; Industry and Private Sector Promotion; Family, Women, and Social Affairs; and Reconstruction and Reintegration. Both the Ministry of the Fight Against HIV/AIDS and the Ministry of Industry have large budgets. The Minister of the Fight Against HIV/AIDS is related to and reportedly maintains good relations with the First Lady. Both the president and the prime minister have some women advisors. The president's diplomatic advisor and close confidante, recently deceased, was a woman. His closest collaborator is probably his wife, the First Lady. There are 223 legislators; 19 are women.

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There are 200 mayors; 9 are women. There are 56 general council presidents; 1 is a woman. In a ranking of women's representation in African legislatures provided to Emboff by the Ministry of Family, Cote d'Ivoire ranks 33 out of the 54 countries on the African continent. In 2007, President Gbagbo issued a declaration on gender equality that encouraged public and private institutions to implement a thirty percent quota for women. The Ministry of Family is editing a draft ordinance to be presented to the president for signature that would make the declaration's provisions the law. The Ministry is also editing another ordinance that would modify the electoral code to require that party candidate lists be composed alternatively of men and women candidates in order to help ensure the election of at least thirty percent of women (often women's names appear at the bottom of candidate lists).

Lack of Access to Education

¶17. (U) While some pockets of society, especially in rural areas, continue to resist education for women, in general there is awareness of the need to educate girls. Girls are especially disadvantaged in terms of access to education as a result of poverty. Many children do not attend school because their parents cannot afford to put food on the table and also pay for school fees, books, pens, and paper. When parents cannot afford to educate all their children, in general they choose to educate some or all of their sons. NGOs have told Emboffs that sexual abuse by teachers is a problem that disproportionately affects girls and many of these victims become pregnant and have to interrupt or end their education. Women made up thirty-three percent of university students nationwide 2006-2007; there were 156,772 students of which 52,201 were women. For school year 2007-2008, while 64.5 percent of school age boys attended primary or secondary school, only 60.3 percent of school age girls were enrolled in school.

¶18. (U) Women in rural areas face significant challenges on account of their gender. On a trip to northwestern Cote d'Ivoire, Emboff spoke with local and international NGOs working on women's issues in some of the most underdeveloped parts of the country, where violence against women is often pervasive. NGO representatives expressed concern that village women have little, if any, formal education, and are dependent on their husbands to meet financial needs. A local NGO based in Odienne, for example, said that around 70 percent of women in the region have trouble saving even 100 CFA (USD 20 cents) per month. Husbands may provide for basic foodstuffs (rice, wheat, etc.) but women are responsible for providing the "sauce" for meals. At mealtime, the women are often the last to eat, after their husbands and children.

¶19. (U) Women are also entirely responsible for all expenses related to children until the children reach about 15 years of age. As a result, children are a heavy financial burden on rural women, even for those who are married. Families with young daughters worry about them getting pregnant out of wedlock. If this happens, NGO representatives said that young men will often deny that they are the father and leave a woman to care for the child alone. Raising a child out of wedlock without a husband is not only financially burdensome but also considered shameful in northern Cote d'Ivoire so families try to avoid this situation at all costs. This results in many girls being married off as soon as they reach puberty: some child brides are as young as 13. Ivoirian law outlaws this practice, but penalties are rarely enforced in villages, where these matters are handled. Cases of this nature rarely make it to the Ivoirian judicial system, which is both complex and expensive. Polygamy, although illegal, is also commonly practiced in rural, northern regions of Cote d'Ivoire. The Secretary General of the Ivoirian Bar Association told Emboff that a bill was drafted to legalize polygamy, but it was shelved after the Bar Association opposed it.

¶10. (U) The provisions of the country's land law, which dates from 1998, do not distinguish between men and women. The law requires that traditional customary certificates be presented to establish ownership of rural land. In practice, in many regions of the country, rural land does not belong to individuals but to a chief who assigns use of certain parcels. In most regions of Cote d'Ivoire, chiefs rarely assign parcels to women since it is not traditional for them to own land. The civil law of 1964 provides that women can inherit from their husbands, but only if there has been a legal marriage. Many women in the country are married in

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traditional ceremonies not recognized by the law and are thus barred from inheriting property from their husbands.

Motherhood

¶11. (U) In general, Ivoirian women are encouraged to have children as a way of enhancing their social status. Having children is seen as the ultimate goal of marriage, and there is immense social pressure on women to become mothers. Husbands of women who are unable or unwilling to have children will often divorce or abandon these women and take a mistress or another wife. Additionally, as childless women grow older, they are often shunned by their own communities, who view them as witches or sorceresses intent on harming other people's children because they lack their own.

¶12. (U) Comment. Women's empowerment in Cote d'Ivoire, as elsewhere in the world, is dependent on access to education and literacy programs as well as financial independence and a shift in cultural attitudes. Embassy has often supported income generating projects under the Ambassador's Self-Help

program which help, in part, to address these issues. Rising poverty rates, resulting from Cote d'Ivoire's political crisis, have caused the plight of rural women to deteriorate over the last six years. HIPC debt relief should provide a benefit for women if the government invests more in the social sectors, and increases actions to achieve gender equality. End Comment.

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